News release

Tropical storms and climate change

20 February 2006

The number of named tropical cyclones in the North Atlantic set a new record in 2005, and today an international panel of scientists will be presenting findings on whether there is a link between recent tropical cyclone activity and climate change.

Met Office Tropical Prediction Scientist Julian Heming was a member of the panel which was tasked with investigating whether climate change is having an effect on global tropical cyclone activity.

Today, those findings will be presented at a World Meteorological Organization conference in Cape Town, South Africa.

Julian Heming explains: "Events such as Hurricane Katrina and other high-impact tropical cyclones of recent years have naturally raised a lot of questions about tropical cyclones and climate change.

"The main conclusion we came to was that none of these high-impact tropical cyclones could be specifically attributed to global warming. Whilst there is no conclusive evidence that climate change is affecting the frequency of tropical cyclones worldwide, there is an ongoing debate as to whether it is affecting their intensity.

"Unfortunately, the science behind these questions does not allow simple answers, but I am pleased that an international collaboration is under way to clarify our current understanding of the issues and set a course for future research.

More on tropical cyclones

Notes to editors:

1. A number of high-impact tropical cyclone events have occurred throughout the globe during 2004 and 2005, including:

- ten fully developed tropical cyclones made landfall in Japan in 2004, causing widespread damage;
- southern China experienced much below-normal tropical cyclone landfalls and subsequently suffered a severe drought;
- four major hurricanes caused extensive damage and disruption to Florida communities in 2004;
- in March 2004 southern Brazil suffered severe damage from a system that had hurricane characteristics, the first recorded cyclone of its type in the region;
- five fully developed cyclones passed through the Cook Islands in a five-week period in February-March 2005;
- the 2005 North Atlantic Hurricane Season broke several records including number of tropical cyclones, number of major hurricanes making landfall and number of category 5 hurricanes. In particular, the landfall of Hurricane Katrina at New Orleans and Mississippi caused unprecedented damage and more than 1,300 deaths.

2. The full text of the report being presented today can be seen at http://www.bom.gov.au/info/CAS-statement.pdf

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